

The BLACK BOX

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Mr. Cress of Monte Carlo," "The Vanished Messenger," "The Lighted Way," etc.

Novelized from the motion picture drama of the same name produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated with photographs from the motion picture production.

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SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing to justice MacDougal, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just begun a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden but in his rooms have appeared black boxes containing notes, signed by a pair of armless hands. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig, the professor's servant, of a double murder. The black boxes continue to appear in uncanny fashion follow him. Lord Ashleigh is murdered by the Hands. Craig captured, escapes to Port Said. Quest and his party follow beyond into the desert. They are captured by Long Jim, escape with Craig as their captives, and turn him over to Inspector French in San Francisco. He escapes from French in a train wreck and is chased by the party across the Mexican line.

THIRTEENTH INSTALLMENT

TONGUES OF FLAME.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

From the shadows of the trees on the farther side of the river, Craig with strained eyes watched Quest's struggle. He saw him reach Lenora, watched him struggle to the bank with her, waited until he had lifted her on to his horse. Then he turned slowly around and faced the one country in the world where freedom was still possible for him. He looked into the wall of darkness, penetrated only at one spot by a little blaze of light. Slowly, with his arm through the bridle of his horse, he limped towards it. As he drew nearer and discovered its source, he hesitated. The light came through the uncurtained windows of a saloon, three long, yellow shafts illuminating the stunted shrubs and sandy places. Craig kept in the shadow between them and drew a little nearer. From inside he could hear the thumping of a worn piano, the twanging of a guitar, the rattle of glasses, the uproarious shouting of men, the shrill laughter of women. The tired men and the lame horse stole reluctantly a little nearer. Craig listened once more wearily. It was home he longed for so much—and rest. The very thought of the place sickened him. Even when he reached the door, he hesitated and instead of entering stood back amongst the shadows. If only he could find any other sort of shelter!

Inside, the scene was ordinary enough. There was a long bar, against which were lounging half a dozen typical Mexican cowpunchers. There was a small space cleared for dancing, at the farther end of which two performers were making weird but vehement music. Three girls were dancing with cowboys, not ungraciously considering the state of the floor and the frequent discords in the music. One of them—the prettiest—stopped abruptly and pushed her partner away from her.

"You have drunk too much, Jose!" she exclaimed. "You cannot dance. You tremble on my feet and you lean against me. I do not like it. I will dance with you another night when you are sober. Go away, please."

Her partner swayed for a moment on his feet. Then he looked down upon her with an ardor glitter in his eyes. He was tall and thin, with a black mustache and yellow, unpleasant-looking teeth.

"So you will not dance any longer with Jose?" he muttered. "Very well, you shall drink with him, then. We will sit together at one of those little tables. Listen, you shall drink wine."

common and those of the company who noticed at all, merely laughed at the girl's futile struggles. Jose's arm was already raised with the knife in his hand, when a sudden blow brought a yell of pain to his lips. The knife fell clattering to the floor. He sprang up, his eyes red with fury. A man had entered the door from behind and was standing within a few feet of him, a man with long, pale face, dark eyes, travel-stained, and with the air of a fugitive. A flood of incoherent abuse streamed from Jose's lips. He stooped for the knife. Marta threw herself upon him. The two cowboys who had been dancing suddenly intervened. The girl screamed.

"It was Jose's fault!" she cried. "Jose was mad. He would have killed me!"

Craig faced them all with sudden courage. "As I came in," he explained, "that man had his knife raised to stab the girl. You don't allow that sort of thing, do you, here?"

The two cowboys linked their arms through Jose's and led him off toward the door. "The stranger's right, Jose," one of them insisted. "You can't carve a girl up in company."

The girl clutched at Craig's arm. "Sit down here, please," she begged. "Wait."

She disappeared for a moment and came back with a glass full of wine, which she set down on the table. "Drink this," she invited. "And thank you for saving me."

Craig emptied the glass eagerly. "I just happened to be the first to see him," he said. "They aren't quite wild enough to allow that here, are they?"

"Quien sabe? The girls do not like me. The men do not care," she declared. "Jose took me by surprise, though, or I would have killed him. But who are you, and where did you come from?"

"I have just crossed the border," he replied. She nodded understandingly. "Where they after you?"

"Yes! With a warrant for my arrest!" She patted his hand. "You are safe now," she whispered. "We care that much for a United States warrant, and she snapped her slim fingers. "You shall stay with us for a time. We will take care of you."

He sighed wearily. Back in the camp, a spirit of devilry had entered into Long Jim and his mates. A tactless remark on the part of one of the deputies had set alight the smoldering fire of resentment which the cowboys had all the time felt against them. At a word from Long Jim they were taken by surprise and tied to the wagon.

The deputies spluttered with rage and fear. Shot rained about them and the canvas of the wagon was riddled. Suddenly they all paused to listen. The sound of a horse's slow footfall was heard close at hand. Presently Quest appeared out of the shadows, carrying Lenora in his arms. Laura rushed forward.

"Lenora!" she cried. "Is she hurt?" Quest laid her tenderly upon the ground. "We had a spill at the bridge," he explained, quickly. "I don't know whether Craig loosened the supports. He got over all right, but it went down under Lenora, who was following, and I had to get her out of the river. Where's the professor?"

The professor came ambling from the tent where he had been lying. He stooped at once over Lenora's still unconscious form. "Dear me!" he exclaimed. "Dear me! Come, come!"

He passed his hand over her side and made a brief examination. "Four ribs broken," he pronounced. "It will be a week, at any rate, before we are able to move her. Nothing more serious, so far as I can see, Mr. Quest, but she'll need rest and all the comfort we can give her."

"Say, that's too bad!" Long Jim declared. "If you've got to stay around for a time, though, you can have the tent. We can double up anywhere, or bunk on the ground. That's right, isn't it?" he added, turning around to the cowboys.

"Has life been so terrible for you?" she whispered. "Have you left behind—but no! you never could have been really wicked. You are not very old, are you? Why do you not stand up and be a man? If you have done wrong, then very likely people have done wrong things to you. Why should you brood over these memories? Why—What are you looking at? Who are these people?"

The professor, with Quest and Long Jim, suddenly appeared round the corner of the building. They walked towards Craig. He shrank back in his place. "If these are your enemies," the girl cried, fiercely, "remember that they cannot touch you here. I'll have the boys out in a minute, if they dare to try it."

Craig struggled to his feet. He made no answer. His eyes were fixed upon the professor's. The girl passed her arm through his and dragged him into the saloon. They passed Jose in the doorway. He scoffed at them. "Say, the boss will fire you, Marta, if you waste all your time with that Yankee," he muttered.

Marta drew the red rose from the bosom of her dress and placed it in Craig's buttonhole. Then she led him without a word to a seat. "If these men try any tricks in here," she said, "there'll be trouble."

Almost at that moment they all three entered. Long Jim nodded to Craig in friendly fashion. "It's all right, cookie," he told them. "Don't you look so scared. This is just a bit of parleyvous business, that's all."

The professor held out a piece of paper. He handed it over to Craig. "Craig," he announced, "this is a dispatch which I found in Allguez with my letters. It is addressed to you, but under the circumstances you will scarcely wonder that I opened it. You had better read it."

Craig accepted the cable form and read it through slowly to himself: To John Craig, Care Prof. Long Ashleigh, Yonkers, New York. "Your sister died today. Her daughter Mary sails on Tuesday to join you in New York. Please meet her."

COMPTON, Solicitor, London. Craig sat for a moment as though stunned. The girl leaned over towards him. "Are they trying to take you on a warrant?" she whispered. "Remember, your sister died today. Her daughter Mary sails on Tuesday to join you in New York. Please meet her."

"I know that," Craig replied, gloomily. One of the girls passed her arm through Long Jim's. "Just one dance," she whispered. He hesitated, looking out of the window. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm tired of those guys," he remarked to Craig, with a grin. "Guess I'll stay here for a bit." Craig was left alone for a few minutes. Suddenly Marta glided in and sat by his side. Her eyes were flashing with anger.

"You know what they said, those two, as they passed out?" she whispered, fiercely. "I heard them. They are going to board the 8:30 train tomorrow morning. The dark man turned and said to the other: 'If he is not on that, we'll wait till we find him. Once we get him in New York, he's our man.'"

A little exclamation of anger broke from Craig's lips. The girl caught at his arm. "Don't go," she begged. "Don't go. There are plenty of places near here where you can hide, where we could go together and live quite simply. I'd work for you. Take me away from this, somewhere over the hills. Don't go to New York. They are cruel, those men. They are hunting you—I can see it in their faces."

Craig shook his head sadly. "Little girl," he said, "I should like to go with you along that valley and over the hills and forget that I had ever lived in any other world. But I can't do it. There's a child there now, on the ocean, nearer to New York every day, my sister's own child and no one to meet her. And—there are the other things. I have sinned and I must pay. . . . My God!"

The room suddenly rang with Marta's shriek. Through the open window by which they were sitting, an arm wrapped in a serape had suddenly hovered over them. Craig, in starting back, had just escaped the downward blow of the knife, which had buried itself in Marta's arm. She fell back, screaming.

"It's Jose!" she cried. "The brute! The brute!" Craig leaping to his feet, furious. Long Jim cursing fiercely, drew his gun. At that moment the door of the saloon was thrown open. Jose came reeling in his serape over his shoulder, a drunken grin on his face. He staggered towards them.

"Jose, you beast!" the girl called out and fell back, fainting. There was the sound of a revolver shot and Jose reeled backwards and fell with a cry across the sanded floor. Jim thrust his smoking gun into this belt and caught Craig by the arm. "Say, you'd better get out of this, cookie!" he muttered. They headed out. Apparently Jose was unpopular, for everyone seemed only anxious to have them clear away.



"Four Ribs Broken," Pronounced the Professor. "She Cannot Be Moved for a Week."

"Fifty dollars for you, then," Quest replied, as they hurried towards the horses, "and an extra ten if we make the train. They galloped off into the distance. The cowboys finished their breakfast and went off to their work. Laura stole out from her tent and started off in rather a shamefaced manner for a walk. Presently Lenora opened her eyes. She, too, stretched out her hand for her watch. Suddenly she sat up in bed with a little exclamation. On the table by her side was a small black box. She took off the lid with trembling fingers, drew out a scrap of paper and read.

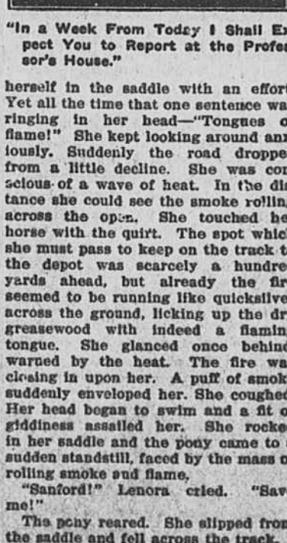
"Fools! Tongues of flame will cross Quest's path. He will never reach the depot alive." Lenora glanced at Laura's empty bed. Then she staggered to the opening of the tent. "Laura!" she cried.

There was no one there. The cowboys had all gone to their work. Laura had passed out of sight across the ridge in the distance. Lenora staggered to the cook wagon, where the Chinese cook was sitting cleaning plates. "Listen!" she cried. "They are in danger, the three men who have gone off to the depot! If you'll ride after them, I will give you a hundred dollars. Give them this," she added, holding out the scrap of paper.

The Chinaman shook his head. He glanced at the slip of paper indifferently and went on with his work. "No can ride, missee," he said. Lenora looked around helplessly. The camp was empty. She staggered across towards her own horse. "Come and help me," she ordered. The Chinaman came unwillingly. They found her saddle, but he only gazed at it in a stolid sort of fashion. "No can fix," he said. "Missee no can ride. Better go back bed."

Lenora pushed him on one side. With a great effort she managed to reach her place in the saddle. Then she turned and, with her face to the depot, galloped away. The pain was excruciating. She could only keep herself in the saddle with an effort. Yet all the time that one sentence was ringing in her head—"Tongues of flame!" She kept looking around anxiously. Suddenly the road dropped from a little decline. She was conscious of a wave of heat. In the distance she could see the smoke rolling across the open. She touched her horse with the quirt. The spot which she must pass to keep on the track to the depot was scarcely a hundred yards ahead, but already the fire seemed to be running like quicksilver across the ground, licking up the dry grasswood with indeed a flaming tongue. She glanced once behind, warned by the heat. The fire was closing in upon her. A puff of smoke suddenly enveloped her. She coughed. Her head began to swim and a fit of giddiness assailed her. She rocked in her saddle and the pony came to a sudden standstill, faced by the mass of rolling smoke and flame.

"Sanford!" Lenora cried. "Save me!" The pony reared. She slipped from the saddle and fell across the track. (TO BE CONTINUED.)



"In a Week From Today I Shall Expect You to Report at the Professor's House."

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